

五十三

Our journey continued
we too headed west
to the grasslands near Hohhot
Mongolian steppes
shared yak butter tea
with a family of peasants
at night we retired
to our yurts, warm and pleasant



Chapter 53 – Inner Mongolia and 5,000 Years of Chinese History

It's often said that China has a "five-thousand-year-old history." That 'fact' is misleading. Yuánmóu Man 元谋人 lived 1.7 million years ago in Yunnan Province in south-west China. The best estimate of the age of Peking Man (北京猿人 Běijīng Yuánrén) is 770,000 years. Evidence of both matriarchal and patriarchal societies existed in many parts of China during the Neolithic Age. Both the 仰韶文化 Yǎngsháo Culture and the 龙山文化 Lóngshān Culture, were thriving in different parts of China more than 8,000 years ago. The Xia Dynasty (2070 BC-1600 BC), the Shang Dynasty (1600 BC-1046 BC) and the Zhou Dynasty (1046 BC-221 BC) were the beginning of the China we know today.



Since China was unified in the Qin Dynasty (221-206 BCE), it was conquered by neighboring countries only twice – by the Mongols during the Yuan Dynasty (1271-1368 CE) and then by the Manchus (actually the Jurchens, the Mongols, and the Khitans) during the Qing Dynasty (1644-1912 CE). Most of what we know as Inner Mongolia today was a part of Mongolia when Kublai Kahn, grandson of Genghis Kahn, defeated the Chinese to launch the Yuan Dynasty. When the Mongols fell to the Ming armies, there were already divisions among the various tribes. At the end of the Qing Dynasty, the new Republic of China incorporated both Manchuria and a large segment of Mongolia into its new Republic. And it wasn't until 1945 that most of the rest of the world recognized what we now know as Mongolia as an independent country. **Inner Mongolia** became an autonomous region of China in 1947.



Inner Mongolia is the 3rd largest political region of China and is a bit off the normal tourist track. The northeastern part of Inner Mongolia reminds me of western Montana with its Larch, Birch and Aspen trees; Poppies, Geraniums, and Iris. There are signs along the road for horseback riding, and livestock abound on the lush grasslands. By Chinese standards, even Hohhot with its 2.3 million population doesn't really rank as a big city. In Inner Mongolia, horse riding, archery, and wrestling used to be known as the "three manly skills." Rodeo is still big in Montana, but only a few high schools and colleges have wrestling programs, and guns trumped bows and arrows shortly after Crazy Horse and Sitting Bull defeated Custer at the Battle of the Little Big Horn in 1876.

We rode horses on rolling grasslands a few hours from Hohhot, Inner Mongolia. Colorful prayer flags like those in Tibet flew from mounds of stones topped with willow branches, and a local family invited us into their house to have tea and sweet cheese. We spoke Putonghua with kids and asked what they would most like and they said "better schools" and then asked us if we could stay and teach. After spending time in the schools and hills, it was time to trot back to our cement yurts complete with bathrooms, western sit-down toilets, air conditioners, and hot showers.

The salty butter tea we drank in the yurts we visited was probably made from cow's milk and not yak. The "cheese" was sweet and chewy and more like candy than the cheese we were used to.



Inner Mongolia's traditional musical claim to fame is Tuvan throat singing – Khoomei (songs of eternity), as it is called in Mongolian, starts with a single pitch. As that pitch is being produced, a second, and sometimes a third pitch comes from the same throat and one is able to hear two and sometimes three sounds simultaneously. This happens by the singer tightening or loosening his throat and manipulating his tongue to produce multiple sounds at the same time.

I first heard Mongolian throat singers in Hong Kong in the 1990s and marvelled how one person could produce several sounds simultaneously. Traditionally a male art, females are now becoming quite adept at the technique. Khoomei was once practiced only on the pastoral highlands of Mongolia, but has found its way into many parts of Inner Mongolia. "Khoomei" means "song of eternity" and dates back more than 1000 years. In Inner Mongolia, where the Heilongjiang (Amur River in Russia) forms the border between Russia and China, Mongolian hunters began settling in as nomadic farmers and it is in this environment Khoomei is said to have begun. In 1929, Arthur Miles tried his luck at Tuvan overtone singing in his cowboy throat rendition of "Lonely Cowboy."

In 2019, I got to visit another section of Inner Mongolia, when we drove west from 漠河 Mòhé in Heilongjiang to 室韦镇 Shìwéizhèn (pop. 80,000) and 满洲里 Mǎnzhōulǐ (pop. 212,000) on the Russian border, both located north of 呼伦贝尔市 Hūlúnbèi'ěr City in the northeastern part of Inner Mongolia. Even though these cities market themselves as having heavy Russian

influences, Shiweizhen's Russian influence seemed very cosmetic when I went out to explore the colorful Moscow Baroque buildings only to find the same Chinese products available everywhere else, and not one Russian coffee or even pastry shop. Manzhouli, on the other hand, had more Russian goods and Russian people. We were very impressed by the 卢布里 Lúbùlǐ Russian Restaurant. Their food, ambiance, and service were all great. Most Manzhouli people who saw us assumed that we were Russian.

